



# Yu Xin's "Memory Palace": Writing Trauma and Violence in Early Medieval Chinese Aulic Poetry

## Citation

Xiaofei Tian. 2016. Yu Xin's "Memory Palace": Writing Trauma and Violence in Early Medieval Chinese Aulic Poetry. In proceedings of the Chinese Medieval Studies Workshop at Rutgers University, April 29-30, 2016.

## Published Version

[http://asianstudies.rutgers.edu/component/content/category/63-department/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=607:apr-29-30-chinese-medieval-studies-workshop&catid=60&Itemid=126](http://asianstudies.rutgers.edu/component/content/category/63-department/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=607:apr-29-30-chinese-medieval-studies-workshop&catid=60&Itemid=126)

## Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:27738665>

## Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Open Access Policy Articles, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#OAP>

## Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.  
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

# Yu Xin's "Memory Palace":

## Writing Trauma and Violence in Early Medieval Chinese Aulic Poetry<sup>1</sup>

Xiaofei Tian

Harvard University

How does one remember a traumatic experience, write about it, and furthermore, turn it into a work of literature? How does traumatic memory shape its literary representation, and how does its literary representation in turn shape one's memory? The study of trauma became prominent in the twentieth century with the rise of psychoanalysis and the outbreak of the World Wars, especially after the Holocaust; but the causes of trauma—war, death, violence, displacement—had appeared throughout human history. In the case of a sixth-century aristocratic Chinese poet, these common questions about traumatic memories and their literary representation are more complicated, and have a far-reaching impact in Chinese literary history.

The poet in question is Yu Xin 庾信 (513-581), one of the leading court poets in the Liang dynasty (502-557), the prosperous, sophisticated southern empire. In his mid-thirties he was caught up in the Hou Jing Rebellion and the fall of the Liang; subsequently he was detained, and spent the rest of his life as an exile, in the courts of the non-Han northern dynasties. Acclaimed as a literary master in life, Yu Xin is considered by posterity the last great poet before

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is part of an ongoing project on early medieval Chinese courtly poetry. I would like to express appreciation for the wonderful graduate students in my seminar of spring 2014 on "Trauma, Diaspora, and Nostalgia in the Sixth Century" for having made the class such a delight to teach, and for my fellow participants at the Medieval Workshop held at Rutgers University in April, 2016. I dedicate this paper to the memory of Alan Berkowitz (1950-2015), beloved friend and colleague, and to the future generations' memory of the past.

the Tang. Most of his extant writings were written in the north. His is a poetry of trauma, loss, and mourning. One of the most intriguing questions is how a consummate court poet like Yu Xin writes pain and suffering in the elegant, restrained language of courtly poetry, a highly stylized form of writing with rigorous conventions.

Focusing on several poems from Yu Xin's famous poetic series "Singing of My Cares" ("Yonghuai" 詠懷), this article argues that Yu Xin, finding the existing poetic conventions no longer adequate to the writing of trauma and complex personal experience, invented a new poetic language and thus a new mode of autobiographical writing, and that he did so by constructing an intricate textual house of memory with the materials, resources, and technologies of the southern court poetry.<sup>2</sup> Making explicit and implicit allusions to works of southern court poetry, Yu Xin reinvented the courtly style to represent pain and suffering. Prior to Yu Xin, a general knowledge of the broad outlines of the poet's life and historical background would usually be more than enough for a reader to grasp the import of a poem. In contrast, the new autographical mode of poetic writing requires an *intimate, detailed* knowledge of the poet's experiential past *and* textual past to fully appreciate his poems.<sup>3</sup> This textual past certainly includes the more remote book

---

<sup>2</sup> Yu Xin's series of twenty-seven poems is known today as "Ni Yonghuai" 擬詠懷 ("Emulating 'Singing of My Cares'"), evoking the well-known poetic series "Yonghuai" by Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210-263). However, one of the earliest sources, *Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚 (completed in 624), cites the poems as simply "Yonghuai shi" 詠懷詩. *Yiwen leiju*, comp. Ouyang Xun 歐陽詢 et al, 26.468.

<sup>3</sup> This is a large, complex argument that needs to be expounded with a much longer exposition than one article can possibly give. Whereas this article focuses more on the necessity to recognize the textual past to which the poet belongs, in my book manuscript tentatively entitled *Writing Empire and Self in Early Medieval Chinese Courtly Poetry* I demonstrate that knowing certain details of the poet's personal past is crucial for understanding some of the "Yonghuai" poems. Regarding this latter point, the difference between Ruan Ji's "Yonghuai" poems and Yu Xin's is

tradition, i.e. canonical works in the bibliographical categories of “classics, histories, masters, and belletristic literature”; but more important is Yu Xin’s frequent reference to the more recent past, i.e. the literary milieu at the Liang court. In other words, this is the poet’s *personal* textual past, not the textual past commonly shared by the elite: it is constituted of writings composed by Yu Xin’s princes and fellow courtiers under specific circumstances, based on what Yu Xin as a privileged member of the court society knew about that highly literary court life. In this aspect the poet’s experiential past and textual past are inseparable. The memory of his traumatic experience is thus closely intertwined with textual memories of the southern court.

This leads to a question: if an intimate knowledge of Yu Xin’s southern past is, as this article argues, a prerequisite for understanding his poetry, then for whom Yu Xin was writing in the north? I suggest that Yu Xin was writing for a specific audience: namely a diasporic community of fellow southern exiles who had shared the same life and textual memories. When the audience was gone, that intimate knowledge was gone as well. Over time Yu Xin became remembered mainly for the beautiful patterning of his poetry, as a master of perfectly crafted parallel couplet, but the deeper meanings underneath the patterning have grown obscure.

Below I will first briefly discuss and clarify the terminology used in the article. The second section discusses Yu Xin’s peculiar move of transforming some of the conventional types and subgenres of southern courtly poetry to create a poetic language adequate to the articulation of personal trauma. The third and fourth sections focus on his construction of a “memory palace” out of his textual and experiential past. “Memory palace” normally refers to a mnemonic device

---

salient: scholars have tried to read Ruan’s poems biographically but can only stop at unprovable speculation based on the premise that the poems were indeed written after the political events had happened (we do not know this); also, the events supposedly referred to in Ruan’s poems were all larger events occurring in Ruan’s day, not personal details.

that uses visualization to organize and store information in one's mind; here I borrow the term to describe Yu Xin's accessing of the southern textual past and his obsessive construction of a new house of memory during exile. This house of memory, built with the words and images of southern courtly poetry, is labyrinthian with numerous nooks and crannies, secret passageways and hidden chambers.

*"Aulic Poetry": Terminology and Usage*

There is no exact Chinese equivalent of the English word "court," which can refer to the place where a sovereign resides, or to a sovereign's retinue, or to the environs of a sovereign with his retinue. The term "court poetry" is often rendered as *gongting shige* 宮廷詩歌 in Chinese, but the term *gongting* 宮廷 more narrowly means "a sovereign's residence," with the architectural, fixed sense of the English word "palace." *Chaoting* 朝廷 is more flexible than *gongting* since it can refer to both the place where a sovereign holds state and the imperial governing body, but it evokes the political power of a sovereign and his government rather than the cultural power embodied by the sovereign, and *chaoting shige* does not exist in actual usage. The term *gongting shige* tends to reinforce a rather common perception of court poetry as being tied to a physical setting—the imperial or princely court—and as being largely composed on court occasions in the presence of the emperor or a prince.

Rather than being merely a physical place of assembly for the sovereign and his retinue, court is a field of dynamic power relations, “a figuration of individual people.”<sup>4</sup> It refers to an elite community of courtiers headed by an emperor or a royal prince, characterized by complex interactions between a sovereign and his retinue as well as amongst the courtiers themselves. It is important to note that a sovereign and his courtiers need each other in this field of literary production as much as in the political arena, and the latter are not puppets controlled by the former or vice versa. Court poetry is the product of this elite community, and is used as a category *only when the court is the locus of cultural values, exerting a centripetal pull throughout the empire*. In other words, if the court is nothing more than the seat of imperial power where a ruler holds state, then we would simply have “poetry composed at court,” but not “court poetry.” A good example of the former is the case of the Qing Emperor Qianlong (r. 1735-96), who had composed more than 40,000 poems through his long life and long reign; yet, despite his prolificacy, neither Emperor Qianlong nor his court was able to dictate literary tastes or cultural values, and the massive imperial poetic corpus had had little impact on Qing poetry or Chinese literary culture in general. In contrast, in the southern empire, roughly from the second quarter of the fifth through the sixth century, all major writers were sovereigns, princes, and their courtiers, and the imperial and princely courts were the centers of cultural production. The emperors and princes participated in public poetic compositions alongside their courtiers on social occasions, a phenomenon that had not been a norm in earlier times; and, in addition to being practitioners, they were arbiters of tastes and values that profoundly influenced

---

<sup>4</sup> Norbert Elias, *The Court Society*, p. 141. Elias’ work transformed European court studies, and even though later developments have revised and nuanced his argument, much of what he says in his seminal book remains inspiring, not only for the study of European courts of all historical periods but also for early medieval court studies.

contemporary cultural scene.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, this was a period when imperial families occupied a dominant position in the cultural life of society. In an effort to draw a distinction between the poetry of this period and the court literature of earlier or later times, to play down its connection with physical setting and formal court occasions and yet to highlight its deep ties with the imperial family, I use “aulic poetry” rather than “court poetry” throughout this article.

In the Liang, Emperor Wu 武帝 (r. 502-49) and the princes of the Xiao 蕭 house—Tong 統 (501-31), Gang 綱 (503-51), and Yi 繹 (508-55)—were influential cultural figures. After Xiao Tong passed away, Xiao Gang was Crown Prince from 531 to 549. In Xiao Gang’s circle poetry was being transformed, and the style espoused by the prince, himself a distinguished poet, was dubbed “Xu Yu Style” (“Xu Yu ti” 徐庾體) after his senior advisors Xu Chi 徐摛 (474-551) and Yu Jianwu 庾肩吾 (487-ca. 552), Yu Xin’s own father, who excelled at literary compositions. Indeed, Xiao Gang’s court clearly demonstrates the complex power dynamics in the literary field of the court: a potentate might be influenced by the older, accomplished literary courtiers, and his own taste in turn produced a wider impact on contemporaries. For Yu Xin, who had grown up in this milieu, the aulic style espoused by his prince and his father, had been internalized by him and stayed with him for the rest of his life.

A persistent belief about aulic poetry is that it is largely subjected to imperial power and leaves little room for personal feelings or self-expression. Yet, the definition of the very term “personal feelings” is a product of our modern bourgeois society in which public/professional and private/personal are segregated. For a member of the court society, the distinction between professional and private or work and leisure would not make any sense, and public and personal

---

<sup>5</sup> See Xiaofei Tian, “Representing Kingship and Imagining Empire in Southern Dynasties Court Poetry,” esp. pp. 3-6.

were closely, inseparably, tied to each other. Whereas aulic poetry demands decorum and restraint in line with unspoken rules of conduct governing a courtier in his social life, neither quality is synonymous with emotionlessness or impersonality. In the poetry of the late sixth-century southern diasporic community, the emotional power is often intensified by formal decorum and restraint exercised by an author well-trained in the aulic style.

In the north, Yu Xin and others the southern diaspora continued to write poetry with and to one another. Notable among the group were Wang Bao 王褒 (513-576), Xiao Hui 蕭摛 (515-573), Liu Fan 劉琰 (510-568), and Liu Zhen 劉臻 (527-598). They had belonged to the same elite circle back in the south, and had experienced the same traumatic life-shattering events. Now, their state and court destroyed, dislocated to a foreign land, they nevertheless continued doing what they had always done: namely, constructing a network amongst fellow courtiers through writing and reading, thus creating a shadow of their former court community. A couplet from Yu Xin “Yonghuai” No. 4, to which I will return in the last section of this article, directly alludes to this community and to the importance of audience and understanding: “Only those weeping at the end of the road / Understand the hardship of this path I travel” 惟彼窮途慟, 知余行路難. If the non-Han nobility of the northern dynasties spoke the Xianbei language amongst themselves, these members of the southern diaspora constituted the northerners’ mirror image by constructing a community of their own, speaking a language only they themselves fully understood.

### *The Transformation of Types and Conventions*



We will begin with “Yonghuai” No. 7, a relatively straightforward, though by no means simple, poem.<sup>6</sup>

榆關斷音信	The Elm Pass is severed from messages; <sup>7</sup>
漢使絕經過	Han envoys have stopped coming this way.
胡笳落淚曲	From Tartar pipes come melodies making tears fall;
4 羌笛斷腸歌	Tibetan flutes play songs that break the heart.
孀腰減束素	Widowed waist: a diminished reel of silk; <sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> The text used here is from Lu Qinli’s 逯欽立 massive compilation, *Xian Qin Han Wei Jin nanbeichao shi* 先秦漢魏晉南北朝詩, p. 2368. All translations in this article are the author’s unless otherwise noted. For commentaries I have consulted the seventeenth-century commentator Ni Fan’s 倪璠 *Yu Zishan jizhu* 庾子山集注 (subsequently as *Jizhu*) and “Yü Hsin’s ‘Songs of Sorrow’,” an article that contains the translations, with notes and commentaries, of the entire poetic series by the late William T. Graham, Jr. and James R. Hightower. With regards to the allusions in Yu Xin’s poems, the point of departure is Ni Fan’s annotations and Graham and Hightower’s article, which references a number of premodern and modern annotations including Ni Fan’s (see Hightower’s Note 3 on p. 6). Those not credited to the foregoing are the discovery of the author of this article. Other modern annotations that have appeared since Graham and Hightower’s article are also consulted, including: *Yu Xin xuanji* 庾信選集, annot. Shu Baozhang 舒寶章; *Xie Tiao, Yu Xin ji qita shiren shiwen xuanping* 謝朓庾信及其他詩人詩文選評, ed. and annot. Yang Ming 楊明 and Yang Tao 楊焘; *Xie Tiao Yu Xin shixuan* 謝朓庾信詩選, annot. Du Xiaolin 杜曉勤. However, there has been no new identification of allusions regarding the poems discussed in this article.

<sup>7</sup> Ni Fan identifies the Elm Pass as “the pass of the Elms” constructed in the Qin (p. 233), known as Elm Grove Frontier 榆林塞 (modern Inner Mongolia). It functions as a general reference to northern frontiers.

<sup>8</sup> A reel of silk is a common literary expression for a woman’s slender waist. The line means that her waist is thinner than a reel of silk. *Shuang* also reads *xian* 纖 (slender).

	別淚損橫波	Parting tears cut the sparkling ripples.
	恨心終不歇	The bitterness in her heart shall never cease,
8	紅顏無復多	Yet the bloom of her face is no longer lush.
	枯木期填海	With dead wood she expects to fill up the sea,
	青山望斷河	And hopes to block the river with the green hill.

Ni Fan regards this female figure as a heroine in a generic “boudoir lament” and purely metaphorical, a line of interpretation that seems to be generally adopted by modern annotators.<sup>9</sup> Yet, for any sixth-century reader this poem would immediately recall a long tradition of verses on a Han woman forced to live in a barbarian land, most specifically Wang Zhaojun 王昭君, the Western Han palace lady married to the Xiongnu khan. Her story was featured in a Liang court song-and-dance performance,<sup>10</sup> and was a popular poetic topic in the Southern Dynasties.<sup>11</sup> Yu

---

<sup>9</sup> Ni Fan comments on the fourth couplet: “[The poet] describes himself suffering from the bitter cold on the frontier, like in a boudoir lament” 自言關塞苦寒之狀若閨怨矣. *Jizhu*, p. 234. Hightower mentions Cai Yan 蔡琰 (fl. early 3rd century) (p. 23); Yang Ming and Yang Tao find evocation of “the ‘Wusun Princess,’ Wang Zhaojun, and Cai Wenji [Cai Yan], and so forth” (*Xie Tiao, Yu Xin ji qita*, p. 98). Du Xiaolin suggests that the poet is comparing himself to the Western Han emissary Zhang Qian 張騫 (d. 113 BCE) or the general Li Ling 李陵 (d. 74 BCE), even though he acknowledges that the fifth and sixth couplets “use boudoir lament as a metaphor for [the poet’s] homesickness.” *Xie Tiao Yu Xin shixuan*, p. 178.

<sup>10</sup> According to Zhijiang’s 智匠 (fl. late 6th century) *Gujin yuelu* 古今樂錄, during the Liang Emperor Wu’s Tianjian 天監 reign (502-19) the court musicians created a new Wang Zhaojun song-and-dance show based on the old Jin-Song musical. Cited in Guo Maoqian 郭茂倩 (fl. 11th century), comp. *Yuefu shiji* 樂府詩集, 29.425.

Xin himself had composed two Wang Zhaojun poems. In the one entitled “Wang Zhaojun,” he writes: “Her waistline measures no more than one foot, / Tears flow in a thousand streaks” 圍腰無一尺, 垂淚有千行.<sup>12</sup> These lines resemble the third couplet of the “Yonghuai” poem above, which likewise speaks of reduced waistline and of tears. Nevertheless, the latter exhibits a precious cleverness: “widowed waist” is a novel expression that understandably gave rise to a more conventional variant “slender waist”,<sup>13</sup> *bielei* is tears shed at parting, but it literally means “departing tears,” which reduce the “sparkling ripples,” a kenning for a woman’s eyes.

The poem contains other recognizable Wang Zhaojun motifs, such as the playing of music, and the fading of her youthful beauty caused by sorrow, natural aging, and the northern climate. In Yu Xin’s other Wang Zhaojun poem, “Lyric of Zhaojun, Written to Imperial Command” (“Zhaojun ci yingzhao” 昭君辭應詔), he writes: “Petal after petal, red bloom falls from her face; / tears in pair flow forth from her eyes” 片片紅顏落, 雙雙淚眼生.<sup>14</sup> The reference to “red bloom of face” recalls line 8 of the above “Yonghuai” poem. Finally, like several other Southern Dynasties poems on the same topic, most notably by Bao Zhao and Shen

---

<sup>11</sup> The poems, to the title “Wang Zhaojun” or “Mingjun ci” 明君辭 (or “Zhaojun yuan” 昭君怨), are conveniently collected together in Guo Maoqian’s *Yuefu shiji* 29.426-435. Notable poets include Bao Zhao 鮑照 (ca. 414-466), Shen Yue 沈約 (441-513), He Xun 何遜 (d. ca. 518), Xiao Gang, Xiao Ji 蕭紀 (508-553, Xiao Gang’s younger brother), Shen Manyuan 沈滿願 (fl. 6th century, Shen Yue’s grand-daughter), and others.

<sup>12</sup> Lu Qinli, comp. *Xian Qin Han Wei*, p. 2348.

<sup>13</sup> Shuang can also refer to a married woman living in solitude, as in Bao Zhao’s “Emulating ‘Hard Traveling’” (“Ni Xinglu nan” 擬行路難) No. 13: “Before coming here I heard that your wife / Lived in solitude, slept alone, and was widely known for her chastity” 來時聞君婦, 閨中孀居獨宿有貞名. Lu Qinli, comp. *Xian Qin Han Wei*, p. 1277.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2348.

Yue, both of Yu Xin's Zhaojun poems end with music-making,<sup>15</sup> which is evoked in the second couplet of the "Yonghuai" poem.

Indeed, I suggest that Yu Xin's poem constitutes a "matching poem" of the Wang Zhaojun poem by Shen Yue, the great master of Southern Dynasties aulic poetry. Shen's piece reads:<sup>16</sup>

- 朝發披香殿 In the morning she set off from the Pixiang Palace;  
夕濟汾陰河 Toward evening she crossed the Fenyin River.  
於茲懷九折 Here her inside was twisted into nine bend;  
4 自此斂雙蛾 From this point on she knitted her eyebrows.  
沾妝如湛露 Her make-up was soaked as if by heavy dews,  
繞臉狀流波 As tears flew down her cheeks like rippling waves.  
日見奔沙起 Every day she saw rolling sand rising in the wind;  
8 稍覺轉蓬多 Gradually she felt the whirling tumbleweeds grow copious.  
胡風犯肌骨 The Tartar wind violates the flesh and bones,  
非直傷綺羅 Not just wounding her silks and gauze.  
銜涕試南望 With tears in her eyes, she looked toward the south—  
12 關山鬱嵯峨 Mountains and passes towering in cluster.

---

<sup>15</sup> The first ends with: "The melody of parting is truly full of bitterness; / The sad strings must be tuned and tightened" 別曲真多恨, 哀絃須更張; the second ends with: "Just as she is playing the zither melody, / it mutates into the sound of the Tartar pipes" 方調琴上曲, 變入胡笳聲.

<sup>16</sup> Lu Qinli, comp. *Xian Qin Han Wei*, p. 1614.

- 始作陽春曲 She first made the tune of sunny spring,  
 終成苦寒歌 Which eventually turned into a song of bitter cold.  
 惟有三五夜 Only on the night of the fifteenth,  
 16 明月暫經過 The bright moon passed by for a short visit.

Remarkably, Yu Xin not only adopts the rhyme scheme of Shen's poem, but he also uses a number of identical rhyme words: *guo*, *ge*, *bo*, *duo*, and *he*, with two of them even appearing in the same positions. The moon's visit (*jingguo* in Shen l.16) is rewritten into the Han envoys' discontinuation of visit (*jingguo* in Yu l.2); "tune" (*qu*) and "song" (*ge*) in Shen's penultimate couplet are transformed into foreign melodies (also *qu* and *ge*) in Yu's second couplet.

Tumbleweed—an image of a woman's disheveled hair—is "copious" (*duo*) in Shen (l.8) while "red bloom" is no longer "lush" (*duo*) in Yu (l.8); "rippling waves" (*bo*) is a metaphor for tears in Shen (l.6) but becomes a kenning for eyes in Yu (l.6). Yu Xin is paying homage to the earlier master by rewriting his poem and leaving clearly discernible traces for his readers.

Yet, if most of Yu Xin's poem reads like a "normal" variation of the Zhaojun theme, its final couplet presents a shock. The first line is, as Ni Fan notes, a reference to Jingwei 精衛,<sup>17</sup> a mythological female avenger who has no place in a poem on the Han palace lady Wang Zhaojun. Notably, Yu Xin uses the phrase *kumu*, "dead wood," to refer to the sticks with which Jingwei fills up the sea: a phrase that does not appear in the source text but has a particular symbolic meaning for Yu Xin and other southern exiles who regularly portrayed themselves as uprooted trees. Although Yu Xin's "*Fu* on the Dead Wood" ("Kushu fu" 枯樹賦) may be the most famous,

<sup>17</sup> Jingwei was a daughter of the Fiery Emperor. She drowned in the Eastern Sea and was transformed into a bird. To avenge herself, she carried sticks and pebbles with her beak to try to fill up the sea with them.

Liu Zhen's poem "Dead Tree by the River" ("Hebian kushu shi" 河邊枯樹詩) shows that it is a metaphor in common circulation among members of the southern diaspora.<sup>18</sup>

No commentator has been able to convincingly identify the baffling "green hill" in the last line of the poem.<sup>19</sup> I believe that it refers to a story about the Western Han empress Dou 竇 (d. 135 BCE). Empress Dou's father had drowned in a river while fishing. After the empress became Empress Dowager, she had the river filled up and a huge grave mound built on top of it. The local people called it "Dou's Green Hill" ("Doushi qingshan" 竇氏青山).<sup>20</sup>

Though both allusions are about vengeful women who were determined to fill up a large body of water, Jingwei is a common poetic image whereas Empress Dou's green hill is rarely, if ever, alluded to in early medieval literature. It is unusual to pair a historical personage—an empress at that—with a mythical figure like Jingwei, but even more unusual to end a Wang Zhaojun poem with the evocation of two fierce, implacable heroines. This would have been quite

---

<sup>18</sup> Lu Qinli, comp. *Xian Qin Han Wei*, p. 2656. Sun Wanshou 孫萬壽 (fl. late 6th century), a member of the eastern diaspora from the fallen state of the Northern Qi, also uses the figure of dead tree to describe his feeling of rootlessness after the Qi fell in a poem, "Dead Tree in the Courtyard" ("Tingqian kushu shi" 庭前枯樹詩). Lu Qinli, comp. *Xian Qin Han Wei*, p. 2641.

<sup>19</sup> Ni Fan does not offer any comment. Hightower tentatively identifies the "green hill" as Mount Hua that had originally blocked the course of the Yellow River, saying that if this is indeed the case, she is expressing the vain hope that the past can be undone." He also cites modern scholar Tan Zhengbi 譚正璧, who takes the hill to be the mountains back home in the South, "in which case the hope is that they will protect the south from the Yellow River, representing the hostile forces of the North." But Hightower concedes that such an interpretation "is even more far-fetched." Graham and Hightower, p. 24.

<sup>20</sup> Zhi Yu's 摯虞 (d. 311) commentary on *Sanfu jue lu* 三輔決錄, cited in *Shi ji* 史記 commentary. Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145 BCE-ca. 86 BCE), *Shi ji* 49.1973. See also 酈道元 *Shuijing zhu jiaoshi* 水經注校釋, 10.189.

shocking to Yu Xin's contemporary readers, who would recognize the conventional Zhaojun motif and the unconventional spin Yu Xin put on it.

The extraordinary ending in fact harks back to Xiao Gang's poem on Wang Zhaojun.<sup>21</sup> Unlike the other poems in the Zhaojun tradition, Xiao Gang's piece ends, not with an aural image, but with a visual motif, alluding to the story about a court painter deliberately misrepresenting Zhaojun's beauty in a portrait and thus leading to the Han emperor's neglect of her: "How unfair to be slandered by a skilled painter— / There is no way for her bitter feelings to get through" 妙工偏見詆, 無由情恨通. Yu Xin constructs his entire poem on a play with the word *tong* 通 (get through) or, more precisely, the failure to get through. His poem begins with news being cut off (*duan* 斷) and envoys no longer coming (*jue* 絕); even music, which as sound travels through space and reaches people easily, serves to *break* (the second *duan* in the poem) the heart. Ironically, in the last couplet the act of filling up (*tian* 填) and thus blocking (the third *duan* in the poem) the river only creates yet another kind of stoppage and obstruction, although this is a more "positive" sort of impeding from the bitter women's points of view, and the flow of water to be impeded mimics Zhaojun's tears. In Yu's poem the only thing that never ceases or diminishes is "the bitterness in her heart" (*hen xin* 恨心), which evokes the "bitter feelings" (*qing hen* 情恨) in Xiao Gang's poem.

One could say that Yu's poem is an elaboration on Xiao's last line, or on Shen's sixth couplet, which is about Zhaojun's southward gaze being obstructed by "mountains and passes towering in cluster." All this is reminiscent of the popular southern literary practice of *fude* 賦得 ("versifying on an assigned topic") on an earlier poetic line. The surprising evocation of two

---

<sup>21</sup> The poem is entitled "Mingjun ci" 明君詞. Lu Qinli, comp. *Xian Qin Han Wei*, p. 1913.

female avengers at the end is thus both based on, and subverts, the southern aulic tradition. Such a move is typical of Yu Xin's poetry written in the north, exemplifying an intimate textual memory that was shared by his fellow exiles.

The next example, "Yonghuai" No. 17, shows more clearly how Yu Xin destabilizes a reader's comfort with familiar poetic conventions by combining and twisting poetic subgenres; the outcome is all the more shocking exactly because its components are quite recognizable. This is Yu Xin's unique technology in giving expression to traumatic experience, the articulation of which is an important step in the process of "working through."

- 日晚荒城上 At dusk, on the desolate city wall:  
 蒼茫餘落暉 Vast and hazy, an endless sunset.  
 都護樓蘭返 The Protector comes back from Loulan;  
 4 將軍疎勒歸 The General returns from Shule.<sup>22</sup>  
 馬有風塵氣 Horses smell of wind and dust;  
 人多關塞衣 Men are all wearing frontier garments.  
 陣雲平不動 Battle-formation clouds hang flat, not moving;  
 8 秋蓬卷欲飛 Autumn tumbleweeds roll up, about to fly away.  
 聞道樓船戰 I hear talk of the campaign of warships,  
 今年不解圍 That the siege will not be lifted this year.

---

<sup>22</sup> Both Loulan and Shule are names of Central Asian countries.



With regards to the first couplet, rather than succumbing to the sort of crude symbolism advocated by Tang and Song popular poetry manuals and taking the setting sun as “a symbol for the declining fortunes of a ruling house,”<sup>23</sup> one would do better recalling some of the most famous early medieval poems with similar openings. For instance, Pan Yue’s 潘岳 (247-300) celebrated poem of homesickness, “Composed at Heyang County” (“Heyang xian zuo” 河陽縣作) No. 2, opens with, “At dusk, dark clouds rise; / I climb on the city wall, and gaze at the great River” 日夕陰雲起，登城望洪河。<sup>24</sup> Or Xie Lingyun’s 謝靈運 (385-433) well-known poem, “Waiting for the Guest I Expected from the South Tower” (“Nanlou zhong wang suozhi ke” 南樓中望所遲客):<sup>25</sup>

杳杳日西頽    Darkly, the sun sets in the west;  
 漫漫長路迫    The endlessly long road presses on me.  
 登樓為誰思    Climbing the tower, for whom am I full of longing?  
 臨江遲來客    Looking upon the river, I eagerly await my guest....

Xie Tiao 謝朓 (464-499) and He Xun, both exerting a great influence on the sixth-century southern poets, also each have several poems about gazing into distance at dusk. In other words, Yu Xin’s poem begins like any early medieval poem on climbing to a high place, gazing

---

<sup>23</sup> Graham and Hightower, p. 40.

<sup>24</sup> Lu Qinli, comp. *Xian Qin Han Wei*, p. 633.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1173. Like Pan Yue’s poem, Xie’s poem is also anthologized in the sixth-century literary anthology *Wen xuan* 文選 and must be familiar to a well-educated medieval reader.

out into the distance, and yearning for home or for a loved one. However, the normalcy soon dissolves, and the reader's expectation is defeated.

In the earlier poems about climbing high and gazing into distance, we always have a historical person—the poet—at a specific place and time, who describes the specific objects in his view. In contrast, Yu Xin's poem takes the reader into a different direction with the peculiar second couplet: "The Protector comes back from Loulan; / The General returns from Shule." The couplet is peculiar because it does not "belong" to a poem about climbing high. Instead, it belongs to the contemporary *yuefu* poetry, particularly to a subgenre of *yuefu* later known as "frontier poetry" (*biansai shi* 邊塞詩), which describes imaginary military campaigns and frontier life in northwestern China.

As is well-known to any student of classical Chinese literature, beginning with Bao Zhao, "frontier poetry" took hold of the imagination of Southern Dynasties poets and was produced in great quantity. In those poems, place names from Central Asia and northwestern China abound to create an exotic atmosphere, and "Protector" and "General" form a customary pair in a parallel couplet. Some examples include:

1. Wang Xun 王訓 (511-36) "Crossing Passes and Mountains" ("Du guanshan" 度關山):

都護疲詔吏 The Protector is tired of giving instructions to clerks;

將軍擅發兵 the General arbitrarily dispatches troops.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1717.

2. Dai Gao 戴暘 (fl. first half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century), “Crossing Passes and Mountains” (“Du guanshan” 度關山):

將軍一百戰 The General has fought in one hundred battles;

都護五千兵 the Protector commands five thousand troops.<sup>27</sup>

3. Liu Xiaowei 劉孝威 (d. 549), “Piebald Horse Gallops On” (“Congma qu” 驄馬驅):

且令都護知 He wants to be known to the Protector,

願被將軍照 And desires to be understood by the General.<sup>28</sup>

4. Yu Xin, “Coming out the North Gate of Ji” (“Chuzi Jibeimen xing” 出自薊北門行):

將軍朝挑戰 The general challenges the enemy in the morning;

都護夜巡營 the Protector inspects the camps at night.<sup>29</sup>

The frequency with which the two official titles are paired in a sixth-century *yuefu*, in addition to the combination of the two exotic place names Loulan and Shule, would have strongly conditioned a contemporary reader to hear echoes of frontier *yuefu* poetry in Yu Xin’s couplet, rather than to seek specific allusions behind them. Similarly, the third and fourth couplets of Yu Xin’s poem—horses, warriors, battle-formation clouds and tumbleweeds—could also be easily taken as part of the general description of a frontier scene in *yuefu* poetry. But once

---

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2100.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1866.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2348.

again our expectation is thwarted, because the frontier *yuefu* tends to be upbeat and macho, and its protagonist is usually a warrior eager for victories and accomplishments; or he may be weary and homesick, but he would never climb high and gaze afar, because “everyone knows” that these are the traditional poetic gestures of a lyrical poet.

The worst breach of the frontier subgenre is the last couplet: “I hear talk of the campaign with warships, / that the siege will not be lifted this year.” Something is terribly wrong with this couplet.<sup>30</sup> Although it is not true that, as Hightower believes, “there is no place for warship in the north,” the mention of warships is indeed startling within the geographical setting established in the poem. It does not “fit” the imagery of cavalry returning from the desert kingdoms, and indeed the Southern Dynasties frontier poetry never mentions warships and navy—the poetic convention dictates that a “frontier poem” only depicts the northwest.<sup>31</sup> It is also notable that the naval battle is *heard of* by the poet, complementing what is seen by him from the city wall; in conjunction with that, the temporal precision of “*this year*” instills a sense of historical specificity and reality into the poem and completely shatters the illusion of the anonymous

---

<sup>30</sup> About this couplet, Hightower asserts, “There is no place for warship in the north” (p. 40). Yet, the Northern Zhou’s military campaign against the Northern Qi in 575 had, for instance, indeed deployed a large navy and many warships sailing from the Wei River onto the Yellow River. *Zhou shu* 周書, 6.93. I am not at all certain that this poem reflects “the poet’s impressions when he first arrived in Chang’an, and the first couplet would refer to the decline of the Liang.” To me, it evokes the Northern Zhou’s grim, relentless resolve to conquer its neighboring states and unify China, and its repeated military exercises and campaigns against the peoples of Central Asia, the Chen, and the Northern Qi. However, it is impossible to know for sure the date and circumstances of the composition of this poem.

<sup>31</sup> Southern frontier poetry is interested neither in the real frontier boundary between south and north China at the time, nor in the southern or southwestern frontiers. See discussions in Xiaofei Tian, *Beacon Fire and Shooting Star: The Literary Culture of the Liang (502-557)*, pp. 323-35.

generality of the frontier *yuefu* carefully constructed in the second through fourth couplet. The poem is brought full circle from the opening couplet that evokes a particular historical voice. Its ending harks back to the motif of an individual lyric poet climbing high and gazing afar with longing for home or friend.

Aesthetically, the inconclusiveness of the navy battle is woven into a beautiful formal balance with the clouds hanging motionless over the horizon like battle formation. The stillness of the air, which implicitly causes the slow moving of the clouds, is also responsible for the temporary immobility of the autumn tumbleweed, which is a familiar poetic figure of a rootless traveler. The motionlessness is only temporary: the tumbleweed is “about to fly away” soon, just as the poet is going to descend from the city wall soon—it is getting dark—and the siege will likewise end soon enough. The impending fall of a city, of a state, is momentarily suspended in a poem, whose ending points to a future beyond its own closure.

In this poem, the poet sets up expectation only to frustrates it. The poem becomes a meta-poetic text that brings together two different kinds of poetry: one on climbing a high place and gazing with longing into distance by a particular historical person (i.e., the poet himself); the other on an imagined northwestern frontier theme. Yu Xin is bending and changing poetic subgenres because existing poetic language and conventions are no longer adequate to articulating his individual experience.

### *Yu Xin's "Memory Palace"*

As the Liang fell apart with the Hou Jing Rebellion, Yu Xin suffered acutely, not the least because he had enjoyed an unusually privileged position at the Liang court. Like his father, he

was a great favorite of the Crown Prince; his own talent and eloquence earned him accolades from the emperor and the princes, in the south and north alike. He was made the mayor of the capital city Jiankang (modern Nanjing) at the age of 35, and by all appearances had had an illustrious career ahead of him. Then, when Hou Jing's rebel army approached Jiankang, Xiao Gang entrusted Yu Xin with the task of severing the Vermillion Bird Pontoon Bridge to the south of the Palace City. The soldiers under his command had just cut away one of the floats when Hou Jing's men loomed into full view. At the sight of their black iron masks, Yu Xin fell back, and his troops followed suit. According to another account, an arrow struck the gate pillar by which Yu Xin's horse was standing, and the sugarcane in his hand fell on the ground; at that moment he turned and fled in panic, and the defense collapsed. Hou Jing's men quickly reconnected the bridge and crossed the Qinhuai River. That was December 9, 548. The rest, as they say, was history.

Yu Xin, along with the royal family and many Liang courtiers, was trapped in the besieged city of Jiankang for five bloody months, bearing witness to acts of heroism and cowardice, violence, starvation, plague, and death. He himself lost both of his two sons and a young daughter. After Jiankang fell, he managed to get out and made his way to Jiangling (in modern Hubei), the provincial capital of Xiao Yi's prefecture. There he was reunited with his aging father, who died shortly afterward. In 553, Xiao Yi ascended the throne. Yu Xin was dispatched as emissary to the Western Wei court, and was detained there. In the meanwhile, the Wei army attacked and captured Jiangling, sacked the city, and executed Xiao Yi, sealing the doom of the Liang. Numerous elites and commoners of Jiangling were taken captives to the Wei capital Chang'an (modern Xi'an), and whatever was left of Yu Xin's immediate family was

presumably among them. Later, while some southern courtiers were allowed to return to the south, Yu Xin was kept at the northern court because of his literary talent. He died there in 581.

While the word “trauma” has been used widely, even indiscriminately, in recent years, it is hard to regard Yu Xin’s experience as anything less than traumatic, as everything he knew was stripped away from him, his state destroyed, his family members killed, and he himself looked at death in the face more than once. In Catherine Caruth’s definition, “trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden, catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.”<sup>32</sup> Delay and repetition are the keywords in understanding traumatic memory. Rather than an event that simply happened in the past,

a traumatic event cannot be localized in one specific time and place, because it keeps coming back to those who are traumatized. As many researchers working on trauma recognize, there is a belatedness, not only in the manifestation of the impact of the traumatic event, but in the very experience of the traumatic event itself. In many ways, trauma itself is a form of memory because it always exists only as memory.<sup>33</sup>

In other words, trauma has double temporalities, being both past and present, and in trauma writing, memories are being constantly recalled *and* constructed anew.

---

<sup>32</sup> Catherine Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, p. 11.

<sup>33</sup> Xiaofei Tian, “Introduction,” in Zhang Daye, *The World of a Tiny Insect*, p. 16.

In Yu Xin's case, he deals with his traumatic experience by constantly invoking the textual past and literally recreating textual memories every time he recall them in his own writings. As a writer, he is haunted by texts from the old south: they keep returning to him and reappearing in his poetry, mutated, fragmented, but recognizable to any reader sharing the same past. It is a particular form of traumatic memory: it is not so much a "working through" his traumatic experience as being unable to get out of it and hopelessly trapped in a house of memory that is labyrinthian and nightmarish.

The following poem is No. 22 of "Yonghuai":<sup>34</sup>

日色臨平樂 The sun shines upon the Pingle Lodge;

風光滿上蘭 A breezy light fills Shanglan.<sup>35</sup>

南國美人去 The Fair One of the south is gone forever,

4 東家棗樹完 Though the eastern neighbor's date tree is saved.<sup>36</sup>

抱松傷別鶴 Embracing the pine, the separated crane grieves;

向鏡絕孤鸞 Facing a mirror, the widowed phoenix ends its life.

---

<sup>34</sup> Lu Qinli, comp. *Xian Qin Han Wei*, p. 2370.

<sup>35</sup> Both Pingle and Shanglan were names of structures in the Western Han's imperial Shanglin Park at Chang'an. *Jizhu*, p. 245.

<sup>36</sup> In the Eastern Han, Wang Ji's 王吉 (d. 48BCE) wife fed him dates from his eastern neighbor's tree, and after he found out about the origin of the dates, he sent his wife away. His neighbor felt so bad that he decided to cut down the tree, and only desisted after Wang Ji relented and took his wife back. The locals made a song: "The eastern neighbor has a tree, / Wang Ji's wife goes away. / The dates are preserved in the eastern home, / The dismissed wife returns home." *Jizhu*, p. 245.



不言登隴首 Who would have thought that, climbing onto the Long Range,  
 8 唯得望長安 I only get to gaze at Chang'an!<sup>37</sup>

The strangeness of this poem lies in the apparent disconnectedness of its two middle couplets from the opening and ending couplets. The middle couplets form a coherent unit of meaning in their depiction of separated spouses/lovers. Regarding the second couplet, one notes that although the object causing so much trouble and strife remains intact, the Fair One is *not* coming back like Wang Ji's wife. The Fair One of the South, clearly evoking the *Chu ci* tradition, is a figure both for the prince (i.e. Xiao Gang) and for the poet himself. The third couplet, with the pine representing a continuation, by the principle of association, of the "date tree" imagery, picks up the motif of lovers' separation and shows that one spouse has survived, bereaved. The lone phoenix that never sings for three years, upon seeing its reflection in a mirror, cries out and dies.<sup>38</sup> For the "separated crane" every commentator cites "The Tune of the Separated Cranes" ("Biehe cao" 別鶴操) and the related story of Muzi 牧子, who was forced to divorce his childless wife and played a sad melody to express his sorrow.<sup>39</sup> However, the juxtaposition of

---

<sup>37</sup> The last line, as Ni Fan observes, echoes Wang Can's famous couplet in his "Seven Sorrows" 七哀詩 No. 1.: "To the south I climb onto the Ba Mound, / Turning back, I look toward Chang'an" 南登灞陵岸, 迴首望長安. Lu Qinli, comp. *Xian Qin Han Wei*, p. 365. For the penultimate line, the source text is Guo Zhongchan's 郭仲產 (d. 454) *Account of Qinzhou* (*Qinzhou ji* 秦州記), in which travelers from outside of the Qin region would climb onto the Long Range and gazes eastward at the Qin plains, filled with homesickness. Ni Fan cites this text to annotate the line from "Yonghuai" No. 3: "The man of Qin gazes from the Long Range" 秦人望隴頭 (*Jizhu*, p. 230).

<sup>38</sup> *Jizhu*, p. 245.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

crane and pine compels us to seek an alternative source text, and in hunting down this source text we begin to enter a complicated web of texts.

The *ur*-text is from Wang Xinzhi 王歆之's (fl. early 5th century) *Account of Divine Realm* 神境記:

There is a stone chamber to the south of Xingyang Commandary, and behind the chamber a solitary pine tree of a thousand feet tall. There is always a pair of cranes there, flying wing to wing in the morning, and matching up their shadows at night. According to the local legend, a husband and wife once were recluses in that chamber, and turned into a pair of cranes when they were hundreds of years old.<sup>40</sup>

In a poem entitled “Lamenting the Deceased on Behalf of Someone” (“Dairen shangwang” 代人傷往), Yu Xin conflates this legend with the famous story about the Green Field cranes:

青田松上一黃鶴	A single yellow crane on the pine at Green Field;
相思樹下兩鴛鴦	Two mandarin ducks under the Lovelorn Tree:
無事交渠更相失	Suddenly for no reason one loses the other;
不及從來莫作雙	Far better to have never been a pair at all.

---

<sup>40</sup> *Yiwen leiju*, 90.1565, 88.1512. Ni Fan identifies this allusion in his “Summary Glossary” (*Jizhu*, p. 251), which is perhaps why Graham/Hightower missed it.

The pathos of this quatrain certainly fits the “Yonghuai” poem under discussion, but we must mention two more texts that stand behind the quatrain. One is Xiao Yi’s “*Fu* on Mandarin Ducks” (“Yuanyang fu” 鴛鴦賦), the topic of a group composition in which Xiao Gang, Yu Xin, and Xu Ling had notably all participated.<sup>41</sup> The *fu* contains the following lines: “The cranes of Green Field fly side by side night and day; the wild geese from South of the Sun have always returned in pair” 青田之鶴, 晝夜俱飛; 日南之鴈, 從來共歸.<sup>42</sup> This quotation shows that, although the original story about the Green Field cranes is about the parting of parents and child, the focus could be easily shifted to the two parent-birds as a couple. The other shadow text is Xiao Gang’s poem, “Watching a Lone Goose Flying at Night” (“Yewang danfei yan” 夜望單飛雁), on which Yu Xin’s quatrain is modeled:<sup>43</sup>

天霜河白夜星稀	In the frosty skies, the River gleams white, stars burning few;
一雁聲嘶何處歸	One wild goose cries hoarsely—where is home?

---

<sup>41</sup> Xu Ling was of course the talented son of the senior courtier Xu Chi, who along with Yu Xin’s father sponsored the “Xu Yu Style.”

<sup>42</sup> Yan Kejun 嚴可均, comp. *Quan shanggu sandai Qin Han sanguo liuchao wen* 全上古三代秦漢三國六朝文, p. 3038. The “wild geese from Rinan” alludes to the story about a pair of wild geese always following the carriage of the magistrate of Rinan. *Yiwen leiju* 91.1579.

<sup>43</sup> Lu Qinli, comp. *Xian Qin Han Wei*, p. 1978. Yu Xin was familiar with Xiao Gang’s poem, for he had in fact written a seven-syllable-line quatrain, “Watching a Lone Goose Flying on an Autumn Night” (“Qiuye wang danfei yan” 秋夜望單飛鴈); judging from the identical titles and their formal similarity, Yu Xin’s quatrain was either composed on the same occasion as Xiao Gang composed his or as a *zhui he* 追和 (“writing a companion piece to an earlier poem”) at a later time. Lu Qinli, comp. *Xian Qin Han Wei*, p. 2410.

早知半路應相失      If it had known it would lose its companions midway,  
 不如從來本獨飛      Far better it would have been to always fly alone.

The second couplet of Yu's quatrain is a rewriting of Xiao Gang's second couplet, and Yu's quatrain provides that invisible link between Xiao Gang's quatrain and the "Yonghuai" poem. Perhaps to this web of texts about bereaved birds, one ought to add yet another, a couplet from Xiao Gang's poem entitled "On Someone's Abandoned Concubine" ("Yong ren qiqie" 詠人弃妾): "A lone swan stops its flight midway; / a widowed phoenix dies in front of the mirror" 獨鵠罷中路, 孤鸞死鏡前.<sup>44</sup>

The above analysis has demonstrated that the two middle couplets of "Yonghuai" No. 22 establish an intricate web of texts about painful separation of lovers/spouses, but we still need to account for their connection to the opening and concluding couplets. I suggest that the beginning and ending couplets not only form a coherent unit of meaning that frames the poem, but also are implicated in another web of texts on a related theme, related, that is, as in the southern poetic repertoire.

In the southern aulic poetry, Shanglan, just like Pingle, is often used to refer to the capital Jiankang. Two particulars poems, one by Shen Yue and the other by Xiao Gang, constitute the subtext here. Shen Yue's poem is entitled "Climbing High and Viewing Spring" 登高望春.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Lu Qinli, comp. *Xian Qin Han Wei*, p. 1953.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1633. I follow the *Yiwen leiju* version in positioning the "Up comes the sun" couplet as the seventh rather than the third couplet (*Yiwen leiju* 28.504). Also see Richard B. Mather's translation of this poem in *The Age of Eternal Brilliance*, Vol. 1, pp. 143-45.

- 登高眺京洛 Climbing high, I gaze afar at the capital Luoyang:  
 街巷紛漠漠 streets and alleys are numerous in a haze.  
 迴首望長安 Turning back, I look toward Chang'an:  
 4 城闕鬱盤桓 its walls and towers stretch endlessly.  
 齊童躡朱履 Qi boys step in their crimson slippers;  
 趙女揚翠翰 Zhao girls raise their kingfisher eyebrows.<sup>46</sup>  
 春風搖雜樹 Spring wind stirs assorted trees:  
 8 葳蕤綠且丹 their dense leaves and branches hang in greens and reds.  
 寶瑟玫瑰柱 Bejeweled harp with rose-gem bridges;  
 金羈瑇瑁鞍 golden halters, saddles decorated with tortoise-shell.  
 淹留宿下蔡 They linger and stay over at Xiagai;  
 12 置酒過上蘭 then set out drinks when passing through Shanglan.  
 日出照鈿黛 Up comes the sun, shining on jewelry and khol;  
 風過動羅紈 a breeze passes, stirring her gossamer dress.  
 解眉還復歛 Her eyebrows are relaxed, then knit together again—  
 16 方知巧笑難 Only now does one know “pretty smiles” are hard to come by.<sup>47</sup>  
 佳期空靡靡 The happy reunion is far in sight;

<sup>46</sup> Lu Ji writes that “her moth brows resemble kingfisher feathers” 蛾眉象翠翰 in his ballad “The Sun Comes Out from the Southeast” (“Richu dongnanyu xing” 日出東南隅行). Lu Qinli, comp. *Xian Qin Han Wei*, p. 652.

<sup>47</sup> “Pretty smile” or “artful smile” echoes a line in the *Shi jing* 詩經 poem “Shiren” 碩人: “So charming is her pretty smile” 巧笑倩兮. Mao #57.

含睇未成歡 Gazing passionately, she fails to find joy.

嘉客不可見 The fine visitor is not to be seen;

20 因君寄長歎 Through you she would like to send him her long sighs.

The third line of Shen's poem transplants the third-century poet Wang Can's immortal line—"Turning back, I look toward Chang'an," but Shen's poem is the opposite of Wang's in every way, as Wang Can writes about the wretched poet going away from the devastated Han capital to the "barbarian" south, and seeing a starving woman abandoning her baby on the way. Instead, Shen writes about a prosperous capital city.<sup>48</sup> In lines 11-12 Shanglan is paired with Xiagai, which is often associated with beautiful women;<sup>49</sup> then in ll. 13-20 the poet describes just such a beautiful woman, who seems to be part of a merry crowd on a spring outing but is filled with melancholy, longing for a "fine visitor....not to be seen."

In the poem by Xiao Gang that also brings up Shanglan, we again see the motif of a woman longing for her departed lover. The poem is entitled "On the Assigned Topic, 'In the Tavern'" ("Fude danglu" 賦得當壚):

---

<sup>48</sup> This motif also had had a long tradition by Shen Yue's time. One thinks of Lu Ji's "The Gentleman Longs for Someone" ("Junzi yousuosi xing" 君子有所思行 and Bao Zhao's "To 'Forming Bonds in the World of Young Men'" ("Dai jieke shaonianchang xing" 代結客少年場行) (Lu Qinli, comp. *Xian Qin Han Wei*, pp. 662, 1267). The opening couplet of Shen's poem contains verbal echoes of Lu Ji's second couplet.

<sup>49</sup> "With one charming smile she bewitched [the people of] Yangcheng and led [the people of] Xiagai astray." In "Fu on the Lecherous Master Dengtu" ("Dengtuzi haose fu" 登徒子好色賦), attributed to Song Yu 宋玉. Yan Kejun, comp. *Quan shanggu sandai*, p. 74.

- 十五正團圓 On the fifteenth, the moon being round,  
 流光滿上蘭 its rippling glow fills Shanglan.  
 當壚設夜酒 In the tavern drinks are set out for the night,  
 4 宿客解金鞍 the guest staying over unties his golden saddle.  
 迎來挾瑟易 It is easy to bring in the harp for a welcoming reception;  
 送別但歌難 seeing off the departed, she finds it hard to sing unaccompanied.  
 欲知心恨急 Want to know how her heart is cut to the quick?  
 8 翻令衣帶寬 Just watch how it makes her sash hang looser.<sup>50</sup>

The second line of this poem reappears almost verbatim in Yu Xin's "Yonghuai" poem. But in Yu Xin's poem, the "Fair One of the South" is gone—both the "fine guest" and the woman longing for him.

So in Shen's and Xiao's poems Shanglan appears connected with a lovelorn woman in the midst of "the good life of the capital city," and this proves to be the hidden link between the opening couplet of Yu Xin's poem and the middle couplets. The poet's viewing of the capital city from heights, invoked in Shen's poem quoting Wang Can, returns in full force in Yu Xin's ending couplet: "Who would have thought that, climbing onto the Long Range, / I only get to gaze at Chang'an!" 不言登隴首，唯得望長安. This may be glossed by a line from a poem by none other than Yu Xin's own father: "On the Long Range one is saddened gazing toward Qin"

---

<sup>50</sup> That is, she is losing weight. I take some liberty with translating *xin hen ji* 心恨急, as *ji* 急 ("intense"; "tight") and *kuan* 寬 (relaxed; wide) form a pair of opposites and the poet is playing with the multiple meanings of the two terms.

隴頭悲望秦。<sup>51</sup> If a man of Qin climbs on the Long Range to look toward Chang'an to relieve his homesickness, or if a Wang Can also looks yearningly toward his devastated capital one last time before going south, then to Yu Xin's horror, and with a great sense of bitter irony, he, the one coming *from* the south, "only gets to look toward Chang'an"! And his viewing of the real Chang'an reveals nothing but the textual city constructed by the southern "fair ones." The poem presents an intricate memory palace of words, filled with secret chambers and passageways that always lead the poet back to his lost south.

*Specter and Shadow: Writing Trauma and Violence in the Aulic Style*

The last section will focus on No. 27, the last poem of the series. It is an elegy about the fall of Jiangling and the death of Xiao Yi, which marked the end of the Liang dynasty in reality, if not in name for a few more years. The subtext of the poem, however, is once again Yu Xin's response to his patron prince, Xiao Gang. As will be shown below, this poem is not only deeply embedded in the southern aulic tradition, but evokes a specific occasion on which the two Liang princes composed poetry together, and recreates a ghostly presence of the Liang court by making complex verbal allusions to that occasion. It represents both a strict observance of the tradition of courtly composition on a social occasion and a deliberate act of aggression and violation, thus embodying the violence and trauma depicted in the poem.

---

<sup>51</sup> Yu Jianwu, "Seeing Liu Zhilin Off at Xinlin" ("Xinlin song Liu Zhilin" 新林送劉之遴). Lu Qinli, comp. *Xian Qin Han Wei*, p. 1994.



被甲陽雲臺 Putting on the armor on Sunny Cloud Terrace:<sup>52</sup>

重雲久未開 layered clouds, long unbroken.

鷄鳴楚地盡 “Cocks Crow”: all Chu’s land has fallen;

鶴唳秦軍來 cranes cried: the Qin army is here.<sup>53</sup>

羅梁猶下礮 Arrayed beams are still being cast down,<sup>54</sup>

楊排久飛灰 even as poplar shields have long turned into flying ashes.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Sunny Cloud Terrace is where the King of Chu had had an erotic dream about the Goddess of the Wu Mountain in “*Fu on Gaotang*” attributed to Song Yu. *Jizhu*, p. 249.

<sup>53</sup> “Cocks Crow” is the name of the Chu song sung by the Han army as it surrounded the Chu troops, luring the Chu troops into thinking that the Han army had taken all of the Chu land and thus demoralizing them. *Shi ji*, 7.333. *Jizhu*, p. 249. The Qin army refers to the army led by the Latter Qin ruler Fu Jian 苻堅 (337-385), who was thoroughly defeated by the Eastern Jin army in the famous Battle of Fei River. To the panicked Qin soldiers in flight, even wind rustling and crane crying sounded like the Jin forces in pursuit. *Jin shu* 晉書, 114.2918. Here, however, Yu Xin gives an ironic twist to the allusion by saying that crying cranes to the defeated Liang troops suggests the advent of the Qin army, which is usually a stand-in for the Western Wei in Yu Xin’s writings. *Jizhu*, p. 249.

<sup>54</sup> This line evokes Pan Yue’s well-known “Elegy for Lord Ma, Governor of Qian” 馬汧督誄. Yan Kejun, *Quanshanggu sandai*, p. 1994. Ma Dun 馬敦 (d. 297) was a Western Jin official who engaged in a spirited defense of the besieged city against the Di barbarians. In the preface to the elegy, Pan Yue gives a vivid depiction of how the defenders cast down beams and rafters, tied with iron chains, to fend off the enemy forces and then pulled the beams and rafters back with the chains for reuse (於是乎發梁棟而用之, 固以鐵鎖機關, 既縱礮而又升焉). The elegy contains the line *di liang wei lei* 礮梁為礮 (tying rafters to throw down at the enemies attacking the city). I wonder if *luo* 羅 may have been a mis-transcription of the less common word *di* 礮. In that case the line should be rendered as “Tied rafters are still being cast down [to thwart the attackers].”

出門車軸折 The carriage axle breaks when he goes out the gate:

吾王不復回 Our prince will not come back.<sup>56</sup>

The poem's meaning could be construed at several levels. Its surface meaning is comprehensible to any premodern reader with a basic competence in the classical tradition; such a competence can be successfully restored for a modern reader by the supply of notes and glossaries. I have placed the annotations in the footnotes, which mostly overlap with earlier commentaries except for the third couplet. At a deeper level, however, this poem is a response to

---

<sup>55</sup> For this line, Ni Fan cites the biography of Yang Xuan 楊璇 in *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 (38.1288): Yang Xuan filled leather bellows (*bainang* 排囊) with lime dust and then sprayed the dust on battlefield to blind the enemy troops. *Jizhu*, p. 249. Ni Fan seems to have taken *yang* 楊 (poplar) as interchangeable with *yang* 揚, to raise. While this is not an impossible interpretation, I believe that *yang pai* here refers to shields made of poplar wood. Yu Xin was very familiar with *Zuo zhuan*, in which we see this statement: “[Yue Qi] presented Jianzi with sixty shields made of poplar wood” 獻楊楯六十於簡子 (*Zuo zhuan*, Ding 6). According to Hu Sanxing's 胡三省 (1230-1302) *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 commentary, “*Pai* [shield] 牌 was called *dun* 楯 in the ancient times. During the Jin and Song dynasties [i.e., fourth and fifth century], it was called *pangpai* 彭排 [sometimes written as 旁排]. In the south it was made of bamboo bound with leather for self-defense; the northerners used wood to make it. *Zuo zhuan*: ‘Yue Qi brought on disaster with [his gift to Jianzi of] poplar shields.’ Thus the use of wood had had a long tradition in the north.” *Zizhi tongjian*, 222.7134. In fact, however, the usage of *pai* or *pangpai* continued into the Tang, with *pai* 牌 sometimes written as *pai* 排 (see for instance *Zhou shu* 29.504: “Xiong carried a shield himself” 雄身負排). *Yang pai* 楊排 in this line is basically poplar shields (*yang dun* 楊楯).

<sup>56</sup> In the Western Han, the Prince of Linjiang (d. 148) was summoned to court on criminal charges. When he was going out the northern city gate of Jiangling, the axle of his carriage broke, wrecking his carriage. Seeing that, the elders of Jiangling wept and said to one another: “Our prince will not come back.” The prince indeed committed suicide after he arrived at the capital (*Shi ji* 59.2094). Ni, p. 250.

a more recent physical and textual event of the Liang court, and so much of its nuances would have been lost without an intimate knowledge of the specific poems it echoes and rewrites.

The opening couplet presents a striking incongruity with the literary tradition, which would constitute an affront to the courtly decorum. In belletristic writings, Sunny Cloud Terrace is a site of erotic desire made famous by the “*Fu* on Gaotang” (“Gaotang fu” 高唐賦), in which the Chu king consummates his love with the goddess of the Wu Mountain in a romantic dream. Before her departure the goddess says to the king: “At dawn I shall be the passing cloud, at dusk the passing rain. Every day from dawn to dusk I will be right there beneath Sunny Terrace.”<sup>57</sup> The image of Sunny Cloud Terrace or Sunny Terrace was popularized by the revival of the Han dynasty song “Wu Mountain Is High” (“Wushan gao” 巫山高) in the late fifth century. Its association with passionate love-longing is summed up in Jiang Yan’s 江淹 (444-505) couplet: “Lovelorn at the foot of the Wu Mountain; / sadly gazing at Sunny Cloud Terrace” 相思巫山渚, 悵望陽雲臺.<sup>58</sup> To connect Sunny Cloud Terrace with putting on the armor, as Yu Xin does, is positively shocking, and shock is an element that finds no place in aulic poetry.

To a Liang courtier, however, Sunny Cloud Terrace was far from being just a literary allusion: it was as much a physical site as a textual site. When Xiao Yi, the Prince of Xiangdong, served as governor of Jingzhou, he had constructed a large park known as the Xiangdong Park in the provincial capital Jiangling, and in the park he had a Sunny Cloud Tower built on an artificial

---

<sup>57</sup> Yan Kejun, comp. *Quan shanggu sandai*, p. 73.

<sup>58</sup> Lu Qinli, comp. *Xian Qin Han Wei*, p. 1580.

hill.<sup>59</sup> During his term at Jingzhou, Xiao Yi became infatuated with a local girl named Li Tao'er 李桃兒. When upon finishing his term he went back to the capital to report duty to the throne, he took her along with him. This, however, was an infringement on the law controlling the mobility of residents, and his brother Xiao Xu 蕭續 (506-547), who succeeded him as the Jingzhou governor, threatened to inform their emperor father. Xiao Gang tried to intervene and make peace between the brothers, but to no avail. Apprehensive of negative consequences, Xiao Yi was forced to send Li Tao'er back to Jiangling.<sup>60</sup> Subsequently Xiao Yi was appointed governor of Jiangzhou, where he composed a poem expressing his longing for Li Tao'er and referred to her as “the person on Sunny Terrace” (“Yangtai ren” 陽臺人). Several courtiers wrote poems in sympathetic response to the prince, and all of the poems mention “Sunny Terrace.”<sup>61</sup> This incident was widely known at the time.

In happier times, Xiao Yi had written a poem entitled “On the Willow Growing by the Eaves of Sunny Cloud Tower” (“Yong Yangyun lou yanliu” 詠陽雲樓簷柳):<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> “On the hill there was Sunny Cloud Tower, which was of a soaring height, and from which one could see everything near or far [or “which could be seen near or far”]” 山上有陽雲樓極高峻遠近皆見. *Zhugong gushi* 渚宮故事, cited in *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽, 196.1075.

<sup>60</sup> *Nan shi* 南史, 53.1321-322.

<sup>61</sup> Xiao Yi's poem is entitled, “Ascending the Hundred Flowers Pavilion at Jiangzhou and Longing for Jing Chu” (“Deng Jiangzhou Baihua ting huai Jing Chu” 登江州百花亭懷荆楚). Lu Qinli, comp. *Xian Qin Han Wei*, p. 2048. The response poems were by Zhu Chao 朱超 and Yin Keng 陰鏗 (fl. 540s-560s). *Ibid.*, pp. 2094, 2451. I have translated and discussed these poems in my book manuscript.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2053.

- 楊柳非花樹 The willow tree is not a flowering tree;  
 依樓自覺春 Yet as it leans against the tower, one feels the presence of spring.  
 枝邊通粉色 Between its branches gleams the color of powder;  
 4 葉裏映吹綸 Amidst its leaves shines forth the fluffy catkin-silk.<sup>63</sup>  
 帶日交簾影 Bathed in the sun, it intersects with the blind's shadow;  
 因吹掃席塵 Taking advantage of piping breeze, it sweeps the dust from the mat.<sup>64</sup>  
 拂簷應有意 Lightly brushing the eaves, it surely has feeling:  
 8 偏宜桃李人 In particular it is suited to the person of peach and plum.

Ostensibly a “poem on object” (*yongwu shi* 詠物詩), this poem on willow is an unabashed love song praising Li Tao’er, whose name is embedded in the last line as “peach and apricot” (*tao li* 桃李). The “color of powder” and “fluffy catkin-silk” (i.e. the fabric of her dress) clearly point to a feminine presence. The third couplet, with the mention of hanging curtain and dusted mat, is rich in amorous suggestions about the inner chamber. The soft, supple willow tree “leaning against the tower” and conveying the message of spring is artfully blended with an erotically charged indoor scene, without violating the compositional mode of “poetry on object” in terms of strictly adhering to the topic at hand. The last line echoes the first line, completing the poetic argument that, although the willow is not a flowering tree, it best complements the “person of peach and plum,” the true flower of spring.

---

<sup>63</sup> What I have translated loosely as “fluffy catkin-silk” (*chuilun* 吹綸) is a kind of airy and light fabric; it is also used to refer to willow catkins as in the phrase *chuilun xu* 吹綸絮.

<sup>64</sup> *Chui* means the blowing of pan pipes, also referring to wind.

Xiao Gang understood his brother's sentiment perfectly. Below is his accompanying piece, which is the basis of Yu Xin's poem and deserves a detailed discussion.<sup>65</sup>

- 曖曖陽雲臺 Hazy and vague is Sunny Cloud Terrace,  
 春柳發新梅 Spring willow sprouts amidst new apricot blossoms.<sup>66</sup>  
 柳枝無極軟 Willow branches are infinitely soft;  
 4 春風隨意來 Spring wind comes as it will.  
 潭沲青帷閉 Rippling and heaving, green curtains are drawn;  
 玲瓏朱扇開 Light shimmering through traceries, vermillion doors swung open.  
 佳人有所望 The fair lady has someone she is expecting—  
 8 車聲非是雷 The sound of his carriage is not that of thunder.

Xiao Gang's poem is exemplary of an "accompanying poem" (*heshi* 和詩): not only does each couplet correspond to Xiao Yi's closely, yet with variation, but his poem sheds light on the

---

<sup>65</sup> "Accompanying the Prince of Xiangdong's Poem on the Willow Growing by Sunny Cloud Tower" ("He Xiangdong wang Yangyun lou yanliu shi" 和湘東王陽雲樓簷柳詩). Lu Qinli, comp. *Xian Qin Han Wei*, p. 1959.

<sup>66</sup> I have used "apricot" to render *mei* 梅 here rather than using the commonly accepted translation "plum" so as not to confuse it with *li* 李, also translated as plum. *Chun liu* 春柳 (spring willow) has a variant, *chun jiao* 春椒 (spring hilltop), though it is not attested to in *Yiwen leiju*, its earliest source (89.1533). Although this variant makes sense within the line by itself ("On spring hilltop apricot newly blossoms"), it does not make sense in the context of the poem, which is about willow, not plum (*mei*). In addition, the second couplet clearly develops the topic of "spring willow," with *liu* explicitly beginning the third line and *chun* the fourth, a common compositional technique in early medieval poetry.

details of the original poem that may have eluded a casual observer. The opening line mimicks the duplicative binomes commonly found in second- and third-century “old poems.” It is also an exquisite response to Xiao Yi because he calls our attention to the fact that Xiao Yi’s poem is wittily evoking two couplets by the Xiao princes’ favorite poet, Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (365-427):

榆柳蔭後簷 Elms and willows shade the back eaves;  
 桃李羅堂前 Peach and plum are arrayed in front of the hall.  
 曖曖遠人村 Hazy and vague: the village afar;  
 依依墟里煙 Lingerinɡ: smoke from neighborhood hearths.<sup>67</sup>

Looking back to Xiao Yi’s poem, we realize that its opening and concluding lines contain many echoes of Tao’s couplets: the willow brushing the eaves, the peach and plum, and the verbal transposition of the *yi yi* 依依 (lingering) of cooking smoke to the depiction of the willow branches (*yi lou* 依樓). Xiao Gang in his accompanying poem picks out the other binome in Tao’s couplets, *aiai* 曖曖 (hazy and vague), as if to show Xiao Yi that he knows exactly what Xiao Yi is doing. The binome is also particularly suitable to the new context, because Sunny Cloud Terrace, with the goddess lingering around as the erotic “cloud and rain,” is aptly enshrouded in mist.

---

<sup>67</sup> From Tao’s famous poem, “Return to Dwell in the Gardens and Fields” (“Gui yuantian ju” 歸園田居) No. 1. Lu Qinli, comp. *Xian Qin Han Wei*, p. 991.

The second line of Xiao Gang's poem succinctly underlines the keywords in Xiao Yi's first couplet: willow, spring, and the flowering tree ("apricot blossoms") that is brought up negatively by Xiao Yi (the "color of powder" in Xiao Yi's poem could be understood as a double reference to the lady and to the apricot blossoms present in the scene). The voluptuous second couplet closely follows Xiao Yi's: the first line depicts willow branches, whose suppleness (*ruan*) indicates new life and suggests a feminine sensuality; the second line about spring wind subtly rejoins the reference to *chuilun* (lit. blown yarn) in the corresponding line of Xiao Yi's poem.

*Tantuo* 潭沲 in the third couplet is an alliterative binome describes rippling water, here transferred to the undulating green curtains (in response to Xiao Yi's "blind"), a color evoking both the unfrozen spring pond and the willow tree; it is also a response to the "piping breeze" (*chui*) in Xiao Yi's fifth line. The sun in Xiao Yi's couplet reappears as the vermilion color of the doors with light shimmering through the trceries. The doors open up to receive the prince-lover while drawn curtains delineate an amorous private space, just as Xiao Yi's third couplet combines outdoor and indoor scenes.

Finally, just as Xiao Yi explicitly mentions "the person of peach and plum" in the last couplet, Xiao Gang brings up "the fair lady" (*jiaren* 佳人) expecting her lord. A witty line—"The sound of his carriage is not that of thunder"—concludes the poem, with its negation (*fei* 非) verbally echoing the same *fei* in Xiao Yi's opening line ("The willow tree is not a flowering tree"). Xiao Gang's line is of course a reversal of the couplet from the Western Han writer Sima Xiangru's 司馬相如 (ca. 179 BCE-117 BCE) "*Fu* on the Tall Gate" ("Changmen fu" 長門賦), which describes a neglected palace lady waiting for her lord in vain: "Thunder rumbled in the



skies, / its sound resembling that of my lord's carriage" 雷殷殷而響起兮, 聲象君之車音.<sup>68</sup>

Xiao Gang turns the source text around and instead signals the happy meeting of the lovers.

One may point out here, at the risk of ruining the delicate touch in the poem, that in traditional cosmology thunder images the ruler or the heir apparent (Sima Xiangru's *fu* was believed to have been written on behalf of Han Emperor Wu's consort).<sup>69</sup> It is perhaps not so fanciful to detect an elusive tone just beneath the verbal surface here, which nevertheless forbids the reader to take it too seriously because it is meant exactly as a light touch: a breezy, brotherly reminder, perhaps imperceptible except to the subtle sensibilities of a Liang prince, of Xiao Yi's place as a *prince*.

If Xiao Gang's poem is a perfect response to Xiao Yi, then Yu Xin's poem is a response to Xiao Gang. Yu Xin uses the same rhyme as Xiao Gang does, and even uses three identical rhyme words: *tai* 臺, *lai* 來, and *kai* 開. While in later times writing an accompanying poem using the rhyme scheme of the original poem, a practice known as *heyun* 和韻, became extremely common, such a phenomenon does not exist in pre-Tang poetry as far as we know. Yu Xin's poem, which uses the same rhyme scheme and even identical rhyme words, is a rare prototype of such a practice.

His opening line reverberates with Xiao Gang's precisely: "Hazy and vague is Sunny Cloud Terrace" 曖曖陽雲臺→"Putting on the armor on Sunny Cloud Terrace" 被甲陽雲臺. The moisturizing cloud with erotic undertone is nevertheless transformed into the menacing "layered

---

<sup>68</sup> Yan Kejun, comp. *Quan shanggu sandai*, p. 245. A fragment of the Western Jin poet Fu Xuan's 傅玄 (217-278) poem reads: "Thunder rumbles, moving my heart: / I listen to it attentively: it is not the sound of his carriage" 雷隱隱, 感妾心, 傾耳清聽非車音. Lu Qinli, comp. *Xian Qin Han Wei*, p. 575.

<sup>69</sup> This is indicated by a preface in the *Wen xuan*, 16.712.

clouds, long unbroken” 重雲久未開, which reminds the reader of the “battle formation clouds” that “hang flat, not moving” in No. 17. There is no sunlight cracking open (*kai*) these clouds. The spring wind that comes (*lai* 來) as it will become the Qin army coming (*lai* 來) upon the Chu land; the Chu king himself is transformed from the dreamy monarch in “*Fu* on Gaotang” into the desperate army commander, Xiang Yu 項羽 (232-202 BCE), also known as the “Hegemon King of the Western Chu” (“Xi Chu bawang” 西楚霸王), surrounded and overwhelmed by enemy troops. The piping breeze is turned into “cranes’ cries” (*heli* 鶴唳), a phrase that in the source text appears along with the sound of wind (*fengsheng* 風聲) as what strikes terror into the hearts of the fleeing soldiers.

Xiao Gang’s third couplet, depicting lowered curtains and opened doors, are transformed into a violent scene of fierce battle in Yu Xin’s third couplet: the city of Jiangling, in the heartland of Chu, tries in vain to close its gates against its powerful foe. The lover’s entry, eagerly anticipated by the fair lady, mutates into that of a terrifying army. Finally, the rumbling sound of the prince’s carriage finds its corresponding image as the ill-fated prince’s carriage with the broken axle: the amorous prince’s much awaited arrival is turned into the elders’ lament, “Our prince will not come back.”

Only when we keep the thunderous sound of the prince’s carriage in mind would we understand Yu Xin’s third couplet on the fierce battle, where Yu Xin’s most significant transformation of Xiao Gang’s poem occurs. A passage from the late Eastern Han warlord Yuan Shao’s 袁紹 (154-202) biography in Fan Ye’s 范曄 (398-445) *Hou Han shu* 後漢書, from which Yu Xin also quotes in “Yonghuai” No. 12, describes just such a battle:

紹為高櫓,起土山,射營中,[營中]皆蒙楯而行,操乃發石車擊紹樓,皆破,軍中呼曰霹靂車。<sup>70</sup>

Yuan Shao constructed high towers and made a dirt hill, from the top of which his men shot arrows into [Cao Cao's] camp. The soldiers in Cao's camp all covered themselves with shields. Cao then used catapult wagon to strike Shao's towers with rocks, and the towers all collapsed. The troops called those wagons 'Thunderclap Wagons'.

We can hear exactly how these verbal echoes reverberate in Yu Xin's poem: the imagery of rumbling thunder and the prince's carriage in Xiao Gang's poem, besides inspiring the "broken axle" couplet, evokes the "thunderclap wagon" and the bitter fight with hurled beams and raised shields. The willow tree, verdant and supple in the Liang princes' poems, metamorphoses into dead, and deathly, wood—i.e. timbers used for destruction and shields made of poplar, with *yang* echoing *yangliu*—and is ultimately reduced to ashes. In early medieval writings, the phrase "flying ashes" (*feihui* 飛灰) is primarily used to refer to the placing of reed ashes in tuning pipes to detect seasonal change, believed to be indicated by the ashes stirring and flying out from various tubes respectively corresponding to the various seasons. As such, the "flying ashes" in Yu Xin's poem is subversive of the "piping breeze" in Xiao Yi and the "spring wind" in Xiao Gang.

Yu Xin has written an "accompanying poem," albeit belated; the classical Chinese literary term for such a composition is *zhui he* 追和. By doing so, he reproduces the social occasion of the courtly group composition, as if he were still writing to princely command, even

<sup>70</sup> *Hou Han shu* 74.2400; also in the earlier *Sanguo zhi* 三國志 6.199.

if he was an exile in the north and the prince in question had been long dead. He executed the courtier's craft with perfection, obeying the subtlest tone set by Xiao Gang in his last couplet: that is, by evoking Xiao Yi with an allusion to a Western Han prince, he seems to indicate that Xiao Yi was no more than a Liang prince, a pretender to the throne.<sup>71</sup> The allusion to the Western Han prince's broken axle hardly befits the dignity of imperial demise, which in medieval writings is regularly referred to as "Yellow Emperor's ascension at Cauldron Lake," "Shun's departure to Cangwu," and the like.

Everything is done just right, and yet everything is wrong. All the more glaringly wrong because Yu Xun is observing all the unspoken rules of writing an accompanying poem at imperial command. At the basic level, his poem is a faithful mirror of Xiao Gang's, responding to Xiao Gang just as Xiao Gang responds to Xiao Yi—agreeing with, echoing, albeit modifying and varying, the original text. However, unlike Xiao Gang's essentially harmonious duet with Xiao Yi, Yu Xin's variation does violence to the content of the original poem and deliberately violates the decorum of courtly composition. The effect of shock and disruption is what Yu Xin aims for, for this is one of the ways in which he manages to write intense traumatic experience in the stylized form of aulic poetry.

### *Conclusion*

---

<sup>71</sup> Yu Xin's negative attitude toward Xiao Yi can be clearly seen in his poetic exposition, "The Lament for the South," in which he passes harsh judgment on Xiao Yi for refusing to save the capital from ruin and killing his brothers and nephews.

Yu Xin's "Yonghuai" No. 4, one couplet of which is quoted earlier in this article, is remarkable for its audacious breach of contemporary poetics and its aggressive demonstration of autobiographical contingency:

楚材稱晉用 Chu's timbers fit Jin's purpose;<sup>72</sup>

秦臣即趙冠 The ministers of Qin put on Zhao king's hats.<sup>73</sup>

離宮延子產 To a detached palace Zichan was invited;<sup>74</sup>

羈旅接陳完 Chen Wan was received in exile.<sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>72</sup> *Zuo zhuan*, Xiang 26: "Although the materials were produced in Chu, Jin enjoyed the actual use of them." *Jizhu*, p. 231. In this story, the "Chu material used by Jin" refers to Wu Ju 伍舉, a Chu native who fled from political trouble in Chu and was about to serve Jin, but longed to go home (and eventually did).

<sup>73</sup> *Hou Han shu*, "Treatises" (*zhi*) 30.3668: "When Qin destroyed Zhao [in 222 BCE], they took the Zhao king's hats and bestowed them on favored ministers." *Jizhu*, p. 231.

<sup>74</sup> Zichan, the worthy minister of Zheng, was sent on a diplomatic mission to Jin, where he was put up in cramped guesthouse and not received in a timely manner by the Jin ruler. Zichan tore down the walls of the guesthouse to make room for his carriage and horses. When criticized by a Jin minister, he gave an eloquent speech on the inappropriate behavior of the Jin ruler; subsequently he was given respectful treatment becoming his dignity. See *Zuo zhuan* Xiang 31. *Jizhu*, p. 231. Hightower claims: "In none of this is the term 'detached hall' 離宮 used, so it is not clear whether the allusion is to a reference to the initial shabby treatment or the lodgings provided subsequently" (p. 18). However, Zichan said in his speech to the Jin minister: "Now the palace of Tongti extends many miles, and yet the feudal lords are put up in slaves' quarters." Du Yu 杜預 (222-285) comments on this remark: "The palace of Tongti was the Jin ruler's 'detached palace.'" Thus it would seem that this line speaks of the favorable treatment that Yu Xin had received in the north.

寓衛非所寓 Lodging in Wei—not a place for lodging;<sup>76</sup>

安齊獨未安 Settling in Qi—but not quite settled.<sup>77</sup>

雪泣悲去魯 Wiping away tears, one lamented departure from Lu;<sup>78</sup>

悽然憶相韓 Sorrowful, one remembered being a minister of Han.<sup>79</sup>

唯彼窮途慟 Only those weeping at the end of the road

---

<sup>75</sup> *Zuo zhuan* Zhuang 22: “Chen Wan” refers to Wan, a noble lord of Chen, who sought refuge in Qi after a coup at Chen court. When he was offered a post of minister, he turned it down, saying, “I am a subject in exile....I would not presume to occupy a high position where I would be quickly slandered by my colleagues.” *Jizhu*, p. 231.

<sup>76</sup> According to the preface to the *Shi jing* poem “Shiwei” 式微 (Mao #36), the Marquis of Li, after being driven out from his native land by the barbarian Di, lodged in Wei; he was well treated and felt at home there, and his ministers tried to persuade him to go home with the poem. *Jizhu*, p. 250.

<sup>77</sup> *Zuo zhuan*, Xi 23: Duke Wen of Jin had wandered in exile for many years before returning to Jin and becoming its ruler. When he was in Qi, he was treated so well that he “settled” there happily (*anzhi* 安之). *Jizhu*, p. 250.

<sup>78</sup> *Mencius* 14a.252: Confucius was reluctant and slow to depart upon leaving Lu, his native land. *Jizhu*, p. 231. This allusion is used in Yang Xiong’s 揚雄 (53 BCE-18 CE) “Fan *Li sao*” 反離騷 (*Han shu* 漢書, 87.3521), and Pan Yue’s “*Fu* on the Western Journey” (“Xizheng fu” 西征賦), anthologized in the *Wen xuan*, 10.442. However, in none of the earlier citations of the incident is Confucius said to have shed tears, only sighing and lingering. “Wiping away tears” (*xueqi* 雪泣) is usually associated with the general Wu Qi’s 吳起 (440-381 BCE) departure from the state of Wei (*Jizhu*, p. 231). When his attendant asked him why he wept, Wu Qi replied that he wept because he foresaw Wei’s loss of land to Qin. Lü Buwei 呂不韋, *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋, 20.1414. One may note that an explicit reference to Wu Qi is to appear in the next “Yonghuai” poem.

<sup>79</sup> *Shi ji*, 55.2033: Zhang Liang’s 張良 (d. 186 BCE) grandfather and father had served as ministers to five generations of Han ruler. After Han fell to Qin, Zhang Liang was bent on revenge and sought someone to assassinate the First Emperor of Qin). *Jizhu*, p. 231. One should note that Zhang Liang also appears in Yu Xin’s “Yonghuai” No. 13.

知余行路難 Understand the hardship of this path I travel.<sup>80</sup>

Think of the “Little Prefaces” in the Mao commentary on the *Shi jing*: a typical preface gives a terse statement about the general context and import of the poem, such as “a gentleman of the state of X laments the corruption of the times.” There is no name attached, and we do not know anything about the said gentleman or about his individual situation. Think of Tao Yuanming, the canonical poet best-known for his “autobiographical” mode of poetic writing: all we need to know about his life in order to appreciate his poetry is that he resigned from office to become a recluse; in any case a typical Tao Yuanming poem itself provides all the information necessary for understanding the poem, and so is the case with Xie Lingyun, the other major early medieval poet. Generally speaking, early medieval literature does not call for any strenuous attempt on the reader’s part to know the details of a writer’s life story in order to achieve a basic understanding of the content of a text, at least not at a literal level. This is, however, not true in Yu Xin’s case: we could not even comprehend this poem’s surface meaning if we did not already know who Yu Xin was and what he had gone through. The poem would have seemed to present a jumble of historical figures, whose connection with one another is tenuous at best and nonexistent at worst. This is *not* what a normal poem was supposed to look like in early medieval times.

Nor does this poem easily fit in with the contemporary poetic ideal. Beginning with 480s, poets embraced a lucid, graceful style embodied by the poetry of Shen Yue, Xie Tiao, and He

---

<sup>80</sup> *Jin shu*, 49.1361: Ruan Ji often went out in his carriage and randomly drove about, and would burst into tears when he came to the end of the road. *Jizhu*, p. 232. “The Hardship of Travel” (“Xinglu nan” 行路難) was an “old tune” refined and popularized by Yuan Song 袁崧 (aka Yuan Shansong 袁山松, d. 401). *Jin shu*, 83.2169.

Xun, marking a drastic turn from the earlier “high court style” established by Yan Yanzhi 顏延之 (384-456) and Xie Lingyun. In Shen Yue’s words, poetry should manifest “three kinds of easiness” (*san yi* 三易): “easy to understand the allusions; easy to know the meaning of words; and easy to read out aloud and recite” 易見事, 易識字, 易讀誦.<sup>81</sup> The use of allusions must not hinder a reader’s understanding of a poem. The poetry critic Zhong Rong 鍾嶸 (ca. 468-518) goes even further in opposing the use of allusions at all in the writing of poetry.<sup>82</sup> Another distinguished writer Xiao Zixian 蕭子顯 (489-537) speaks disapprovingly of the densely allusive style:

次則緝事比類, 非對不發, 博物可嘉, 職成拘制。或全借古語, 用申今情, 崎嶇牽引, 直為偶說, 唯覩事例, 頓失清采。

Next we see a style that assembles allusions and brings together things of the same category for comparison. The author does not write anything without pairing up references. Although his broad knowledge is admirable, it eventually becomes a limitation. Sometimes one borrows the words of the ancients in their entirety to express the feelings of a modern person, which is like drawing a cart over a rugged road or a puppet talking. All that the reader sees are allusions and references whereas the lucid stylishness is altogether lost.<sup>83</sup>

---

<sup>81</sup> Yan Zhitui 顏之推, *Yanshi jiaxun* 顏氏家訓, p. 253.

<sup>82</sup> “As for singing of feelings and nature, why should the use of allusions be prized at all” 至於吟詠情性, 亦何貴於用事? Zhong Rong, *Shi pin* 詩品, p. 173.

<sup>83</sup> *Nan Qi shu* 南齊書, 52.908.



“Yonghuai” No. 4 is a blatant violation of the prohibition against wanton use of allusions, but Yu Xin’s idiosyncrasy does not stop there. He employs a particular kind of allusion: rather than references to a phrase in an earlier text or to a fictional figure such as from the parables of *Zhuangzi*, these are mostly allusions to historical figures in early historiography. It needs to be noted that referring to historical personages in a series of parallels is common in early medieval poetry (or *fu*), but such references usually occur as only a small part of a text, never taking up almost the entire poem; moreover, the personages alluded to in the other poems usually have an easily identifiable common quality or identity (for example, noble-minded recluses refusing to serve in government) clearly spelled out by the poet. It is extremely uncommon to narrate one’s own life story by enumerating historical persons whose identities and characteristics are as diverse and incompatible as Wu Ju, Zichan, Chen Wan, the Marquis of Li, Duke Wen of Jin, Confucius, and Zhang Liang, not to mention the Zhao king (either King Wuling, famous for his adoption of Tartar-style jacket and hat, or his son King Huiwen). Each of these historical figures possesses one point of similarity to Yu Xin’s own life, but none provides the perfect parallel, and Yu Xin has to move rapidly through a succession of many historical figures to give a complete portrayal of his experience. If a measure of solace for one’s suffering could be sought by looking to historical precedents, then the poet fails to find solace because he fails to find any true precedent for what he has gone through.

This lack of perfect historical precedence can be said both for Yu Xin’s experience and for the poetic conventions that he worked with. Unlike the gradual unraveling of the Han empire or even the collapse of the Western Jin due to civil wars and then under the northern non-Han people’s invasion, the fall of the Liang was sudden, unexpected, and all the more traumatic for

that reason. The Southern Dynasties aulic poetic tradition in which Yu Xin was most at home, beginning as it did with representing kingship and empire, offered no resources and technologies for Yu Xin to write about the failure of kingship and the fall of empire. And if he looked beyond that tradition, all he saw were poems so general and so unconcerned with historical particulars that they would have been of little use to him. The point to take away here is that the poet was confronted with the most difficult poetic topic he was ever assigned, and that he grappled with it in a linguistic medium found inadequate to the task at hand; he must invent a new language in order to make sense of the senseless events happening to his state and to his own life.

“Yonghuai” No. 4 is both about the impossibility of articulating this traumatic experience and, with its deliberate awkwardness and thickness, embodies the very attempt the poet makes at articulation. The “ruggedness” (*qiqu* 崎嶇) of the poetic expression, being densely allusive and breaching the courtly decorum, becomes a perfect figure of the ruggedness of the symbolic road he travels on. Its last couplet directly addresses the problem of understanding: for Yu Xin, he was self-consciously writing a poetry of trauma and pain that he himself did not expect to be fully understood and appreciated by all readers.

#### Works Cited

- Caruth, Catherine. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- Elias, Norbert. *The Court Society*, trans. Edmund Jephcott. New York: Pantheon Books, 1983.
- Guo Maoqian 郭茂倩, comp. *Yuefu shiji* 樂府詩集. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979.
- Graham Jr., William T. and James R. Hightower, “Yü Hsin’s ‘Songs of Sorrow.’” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 43.1 (June 1983): 5-55.
- Han shu* 漢書, comp. Ban Gu 班固. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962.
- Hou Han shu* 後漢書, comp. Fan Ye 范曄. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965.
- Jin shu* 晉書, comp. Fang Xuanling 房玄齡 et al. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974.

- Li, Daoyuan 酈道元. *Shuijing zhu jiaoshi* 水經注校釋, annot. Chen Qiaoyi 陳橋驛. Hangzhou: Hangzhou daxue chubanshe, 1999.
- Lu Qinli 逯欽立, comp. *Xian Qin Han Wei Jin nanbeichao shi* 先秦漢魏晉南北朝詩. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1995.
- Lü Buwei 呂不韋. *Lüshi chunqiu jiaoshi* 呂氏春秋校釋. Annot. Chen Qiyu 陳奇猷. Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe, 1984.
- Mather, Richard B. *Three Lyric Poets of the Yung-ming Era (483-493)*. 2 volumes. Leiden: Brill, 2003.
- Nan Qi shu* 南齊書, comp. Xiao Zixian 蕭子顯. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1972.
- Nan shi* 南史, comp. Li Yanshou 李延壽. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975.
- Sanguo zhi* 三國志, comp. Chen Shou 陳壽. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959.
- Shi ji* 史記, comp. Sima Qian 司馬遷. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959.
- Taiping yulan* 太平御覽, comp. Li Fang 李昉 et al. Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1975 reprint.
- Tian, Xiaofei. Beacon Fire and Shooting Star: The Literary Culture of the Liang (502-557). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Asia Center, 2007.
- , "Representing Kingship and Imagining Empire in Southern Dynasties Court Poetry." *T'oung Pao* 102-1-3 (2016): 1-56.
- Xiao Tong 蕭統, comp. *Wen xuan* 文選. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1994.
- Xie Tiao 謝朓, Yu Xin 庾信 et al. *Xie Tiao, Yu Xin ji qita shiren shiwen xuanping* 謝朓庾信及其他詩人詩文選評, ed. and annot. Yang Ming 楊明 and Yang Tao 楊焘. Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 2002.
- Xie Tiao 謝朓 and Yu Xin 庾信, *Xie Tiao Yu Xin shixuan* 謝朓庾信詩選, ed. and annot. Du Xiaoqin 杜曉勤. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2006.
- Yan Kejun 嚴可均, comp. *Quan shanggu sandai Qin Han sanguo liuchao wen* 全上古三代秦漢三國六朝文. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987.
- Yan Zhitui 顏之推. *Yanshi jiaxun jijie* 顏氏家訓集解. Annot. Wang Liqi 王利器. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1980.
- Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚, comp. Ouyang Xun 歐陽詢 et al. Taipei: Wenguang chubanshe, 1974.
- Yu Xin 庾信. *Yu Xin xuanji* 庾信選集, ed. and annot. Shu Baozhang 舒寶章. He'nan: Zhongzhou shuhuashe, 1983.
- . *Yu Zishan jizhu* 庾子山集注, annot. Ni Fan 倪璠. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980.
- Zhang Daye 張大野. *The World of a Tiny Insect: A Memoir of the Taiping Rebellion and Its Aftermath*, trans. with a critical introduction by Xiaofei Tian. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013.
- Zhong Rong 鍾嶸. *Shi pin jizhu* 詩品集注. Annot. Cao Xu 曹旭. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1994.
- Zhou shu* 周書, comp. Linghu Defen 令狐德棻 et al. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1971.
- Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑, comp. Sima Guang 司馬光. Beijing: Guji chubanshe, 1956.